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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001155

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STATE/G/TIP FOR SALLY NEUMANN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV KDEM KWMN PHUM BG

SUBJECT: CORRUPTION TRIAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST COMMENCES

REF: DHAKA 00956

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The corruption trial of human rights activist Sigma Huda (referred to locally as Sigma) and her husband, former government minister Nazrul Huda, began on July 9. At her first appearance in court on July 5 Sigma appeared frail but ambulatory. During the first week of the trial her health seemed to have improved. Prison officials also guaranteed her access to her private physician. END SUMMARY.

CORRUPTION TRIAL OF SIGMA AND NAZRUL HUDA BEGINS

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¶2. (SBU) The corruption trial of Sigma Huda and her husband Nazrul began on July 9 in Dhaka. Sigma is the secretary general of the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) and president of the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA). Sigma is also serving a three-year term as UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons (reftel). Her husband Nazrul was the Communications Minister in the previous government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

¶3. (SBU) Sigma was charged with corruption in her capacity as publisher of a news magazine. She stands accused of receiving 240 million taka (\$3.6 million) from a contractor of the Roads and Highway Department, which was part of her husband's ministry.

¶4. (SBU) On July 5, the Supreme Court overturned a High Court injunction that had prevented police from detaining Sigma. The following day, Sigma appeared before the Special Judge's Court in Dhaka for the framing of charges against her. She arrived at the court in an ambulance, and was brought into the chamber on a stretcher with oxygen tubes in her nose. The judge in the case denied a petition by Sigma's lawyers to postpone the process on medical grounds, and ordered the trial to commence on July 9.

NEW ALLEGATIONS ARISE

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¶5. (SBU) New corruption charges were filed against Sigma, along with BSEHR Executive Director Alena Khan, on July 9. A contractor with the Roads and Highways Department alleged that he was never paid for approximately \$2,000 in construction work he completed for BSEHR. He claims when he attempted to collect payment for the work, Sigma threatened to have her husband create problems for him in collecting payment for work done for the Roads and Highways Department.

SIGMA'S HEALTH A CONCERN

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¶16. (SBU) Post spoke with Sigma's sister Khushi Kabir after Sigma's initial court appearance. Khushi said Sigma suffered from heart and kidney problems as well as diabetes. She has three stents in her heart, and was scheduled to go to Singapore for a check-up and possible surgery when the charges against her were filed in June. On the day she was detained, she had undergone an angiogram at the hospital.

¶17. (SBU) Khushi said the court had denied Sigma's lawyers' petition to grant her "division" -- privileged status that permits VIP detainees to be held in nicer facilities. Khushi expressed concern that her sister was not getting adequate medical attention. The Charge mentioned the health concerns to Foreign Advisor Iftekhar Chowdhury on July 10. He said he was unaware of her illness, noting he had received calls on the issue and promised to follow up.

¶18. (SBU) When her trial began on July 9, Sigma appeared healthier. She used the normal police van to get from prison to court, and sat up during proceedings and required no oxygen or assistance. Khushi said she had been permitted to see Sigma once at prison, and Sigma was able to speak to her family every day at court. She also had access to her private lawyers.

¶19. (SBU) In response to concerns about Sigma's health, Deputy Inspector General of Prisons Shamsul Haider Siddiqui held a news briefing in which he said prison authorities were "looking after her carefully." He said she is being held in

DHAKA 00001155 002 OF 002

the same area as three other female VIP prisoners, and that she can see her private physician whenever she requests.

¶10. (SBU) Post continues to monitor developments in this case closely.
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